The AGRICULTURAL WORKFORCE

A Strategy for the Future

Prepared by
The Joint Management Committee for
Agricultural Employment Policy

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Introduction

In keeping with their commitment to achieve a more effective coordination of their planning, regulatory, and leadership efforts, the governments of Canada and of British Columbia recently gave their approval to a Memorandum of Understanding that addresses the human resources situation facing the Province's primary agricultural sector. The particular intent of this Memorandum of Understanding is to

> ***provide a mechanism for cooperation and consultation between the parties in the development of policies, programs, and strategies targeted at the development and utilization of Canadian agricultural workers employed in the primary agricultural sector.***

To successfully address the human resources situation facing the agricultural sector, consultation and cooperation must occur, not only between the appropriate departments, ministries and agencies of the two respective governments, but also between these bodies and representatives of the industries that make up the sector. Accordingly, the Memorandum has provided for the establishment of a Joint Management Committee that includes representation from

- the British Columbia Federation of Agriculture
- Employment and Immigration Canada
- the British Columbia Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food
- Agriculture Canada
- the British Columbia Ministry of Advanced Education, Training and Technology

Under the terms of the Memorandum, the Joint Management Committee is responsible for

> - ***identifying and recommending to the parties [complementary] programs and initiatives to be undertaken which will contribute to the development of an adequate labour force for the agricultural sector***

- ***[considering and proposing] initiatives that address such matters as the availability and demand for agricultural labourers, skill level requirements, training needs, identification and dissemination of guidelines for wages, working and living conditions, and the identification of research projects meriting funding.***

This document represents the Joint Management Committee's first step in carrying out its responsibilities. In the following pages, the Committee has provided an assessment of the existing situation and articulated a vision of the situation that can be created within five years in British Columbia. The Mission to be accomplished has been clearly defined and eight specific objectives related to the Mission have been identified. Finally, the Committee has established a plan of action, indicating its priorities and outlining how the various partners it represents will contribute to meeting the present human resources challenge that faces the province's agricultural sector.

The Present Environment

British Columbia's primary agricultural sector makes an important contribution to the economy and social fabric of the province and the nation. In 1990, the total value of agricultural products sold by B.C. farmers was well over one billion dollars. The sector produces an enormous variety of products (agriculture in B.C. is more diverse than in any other province) and provides almost half of the food purchased by B.C. consumers. Certain agricultural industries in B.C. contribute significantly to national production totals (e.g., B.C. is the second largest producer of horticultural products, accounting for 15% of the Canadian farm gate). Primary agriculture also provides direct employment for over 33 000 people, in occupations ranging from seasonal harvesting to high-tech crop or herd management.

Despite its importance and its undeniable successes, however, the province's agricultural sector faces a number of serious challenges:

- increased globalization and freer trade (occurring as a result of recent international trade agreements) are creating more competitive market conditions, even as they open up new opportunities
- changing public priorities and concerns (e.g., increased emphasis on food quality, environmental protection, sustainable development, and animal rights) are adding to the factors that agricultural producers must take into account
- limitations on the province's resource base are becoming more apparent, causing the potential for land-use conflict to increase.

To meet these challenges, the industries of British Columbia's agricultural sector require motivated people who can supply the creativity, expertise, and plain hard work that is needed to succeed. Yet it is here that the sector faces what may be its most critical challenge—a complicated and worsening shortage of agricultural personnel.

Human Resources — The Critical Challenge

British Columbia's agricultural sector is presently experiencing a shortage of both permanent and temporary workers. The extent of this shortage varies from commodity to commodity and region to region. A shortage of unskilled seasonal workers, for example, is one of the most significant problems for the fruit and vegetable producers, for whom this type of labour represents up to 90% of what is required in the way of hired labour. In the beef production or dairy industries, unskilled or semi-skilled labour is available, but only at hourly wage rates well in excess of the minimum wage. In the regions where these producers are based, competition with the mining, lumber, construction, and other industries tends to drive up the costs of labour.

More serious still is the shortage of skilled personnel within the sector. Producers themselves often lack some of the business skills required to effectively manage all of the various aspects of a sophisticated agricultural operation (e.g., the ability to analyze markets, plan production, and handle a range of complex personnel demands). At the same time, there exist acute shortages of applicants with technical skills in areas such as

- the development and application of fertilizers and pesticides
- entomology
- budding
- botany (e.g., potato growers need a consulting service capable of carrying out leaf and tissue analysis on short notice, to detect fertilization, irrigation, or disease problems and propose appropriate remedial action)
- controlled environment horticulture (i.e., greenhouse and nursery management and maintenance).

Although the agricultural labour situation is complex and its manifestations varied, the main factors associated with the present shortage are clear:

- changing demographic patterns
- limited human resource planning and inadequate training
- the negative image of agricultural employment
- fragmentation of policy affecting agricultural labour and inadequate analytical information.

A closer examination of each of these factors yields a clearer picture of the extent of the human resources challenge and provides some insight into the courses of action that must be adopted.

Changing Demographic Patterns

The considerable rural-urban migration that British Columbia, like other advanced societies around the world, has experienced since the middle of the century has undoubtedly contributed to the present human resources situation in the agricultural sector. One result of this continuing demographic shift has been to significantly reduce the population of individuals whose personal upbringing might lead them to consider careers in agriculture.

This rural-urban migration, however, is not the only societal demographic trend having an impact on the agricultural labour crisis. During the coming decade, Canada as a whole will experience an increasing shortage of workers, as the effects of our declining birth rate and our aging population begin to make themselves felt. The specifics of this forecast have been detailed in several publications, among them, the report of Commissioner Jean de Grandpré et al, *Adjusting to Win: The Report of the Advisory Council on Adjustment* (Ottawa: Government of Canada, 1989), which notes that

> *...The "baby bust" will greatly affect the labour market, since Canada may not be able to rely on immigration to ensure a stable and sizeable work force in the future. The "baby bust" will reduce the flow of new entrants into the labour market.* (p. 23)

The implication of these two seemingly irreversible trends is clear: in the absence of specific action aimed at addressing labour shortages in the agricultural sector, these are likely only to worsen.

Limited Human Resource Planning and Inadequate Training

To a considerable extent, the two related problems of limited human resource planning and inadequate training have led to the present shortages of skilled personnel within British Columbia's agricultural sector.

Effective human resource planning involves being able to accurately forecast human resource needs and knowing how to maintain acquired human resources. This in turn requires that producers and managers within the industry possess training in the human resource planning area and that training programs emphasizing needed technical skills for workers in particular industries be readily available. Yet the human resource planning training that is presently available is insufficient to meet the sector's needs. As well, there are not enough programs that can provide the type of training specifically required to fill many of the more demanding positions within the industry.

A number of established systems and programs do exist to meet the training and educational requirements of the sector. The agriculture programs available through the province's post-secondary institutions (UBC, the colleges, the OLA) are complemented by producer seminars offered under the auspices of the Farm Management Initiative (by ARDCORP working in conjunction with the Agricultural Employment Services/Canada Employment Centres). Some of these, however, are seen by industry as unresponsive to their real needs (e.g., industries have cited a need for trained and educated workers who also have practical experience at the farm or ranch level, yet traditionally designed post-secondary agricultural programs contain no workstudy component).

On the other hand, the importance of management and technical training is not always fully recognized and accepted by those within the agricultural sector. Although considerable gains in worker productivity have been achieved in this sector during the past twenty years,[1] such gains can only be sustained as long as agricultural workers are able to assimilate and work with the continually improving technologies that producers will have to adopt to remain competitive. Already further technological improvement can be foreseen in areas such as

- propagation
- pest control
- fertilization
- automation of harvesting
- irrigation
- indoor environmental control (for greenhouses, animal facilities, etc.)
- computer-assisted forecasting and farm management.

1 Over the 1970-89 period, real Gross Domestic Product in agriculture per person employed (paid and non-paid workers) grew at an average annual rate of about 1.5%. This compares favourably with the national average rate over the same period

This rapid technological development will require a more highly trained and sophisticated workforce in the agricultural sector; the costs of hired farm labour can be expected to increase by 5% per year or more into the foreseeable future, making effective worker training (and retraining) a critical element in maintaining productivity and sustaining the viability of industries within the sector.

The Negative Image of Agricultural Employment

Part of the personnel shortage experienced by industries in the agricultural sector occurs because the sector does not have the type of image needed to attract prospective workers. The working hours can be demanding and unconventional, and employment may be in isolated areas where opportunities for cultural diversion are limited. In addition, the sector is seen by some as offering low rates of remuneration and poor benefits for work that is often short term and physically demanding. Highly skilled personnel may also believe that the opportunities for career advancement within the sector are unduly limited.

Beyond this, adverse publicity focused on the housing that some agricultural employers make available to seasonal employees as part of the traditional benefit package reinforces the negative image of working conditions in the sector, even though such shelter conforms to the requirements covered by applicable legislation. Here the conflicting expectations of employers and employees may lie at the root of the problem.

Fragmentation of Policy and Inadequate Analytical Information

To date, government policies affecting agricultural labour have been developed and implemented by several different departments and ministries within the two senior levels of government. In some instances, moreover, government policies and programs designed to address other concerns actually contribute to limiting the supply of agricultural labour (e.g., current programs aimed at providing various forms of legitimate social assistance have created a situation in which the present incentives to seek employment in agriculture are insufficient/uncompetitive).

Even where initiatives have been undertaken to deal specifically with agricultural labour issues (e.g., Agricultural Employment Services delivers programs tailored to meeting the particular needs of the agricultural sector), these have not been part of a comprehensive and coordinated approach involving all agencies with relevant jurisdictions and the industries that are affected. The experimental implementation of an enhanced Foreign Worker Recruitment process undertaken by the nursery shared management committee represents a very recent exception to this long-standing trend.

Compounding the problem, there has been a singular lack of information upon which to base policy decisions pertaining to agricultural labour. Although some data exists, the detailed analytical output and essential data needed to examine the nature and scope of the human resource problems in the sector are unavailable. Trends and likely future needs as a result of other factors affecting the industry remain to be identified and documented. Again, the Labour Market Outlook and Strategic Analysis initiative undertaken by the Agricultural Working Group to examine the labour situation in the horticulture industry represents a very recent attempt to rectify this situation.

Vision

The human resource challenges that face British Columbia's agricultural sector today will be met. The sector will provide opportunities for meaningful and satisfactory employment. Qualified and committed people (both employers and employees) will be attracted to agricultural work. These individuals will be well positioned to adjust to continuing technological and market changes and keep their industries vital and competitive.

Mission Statement

Working in concert, the partners represented on the Joint Management Committee will address the labour supply and job training needs of British Columbia's agricultural sector.

Objectives

In carrying out its mission, the Joint Committee will pursue the following objectives, seeking to

- enhance the working partnership between the various private and public sector groups concerned with agricultural employment
- develop programs and provide opportunities for agricultural employers and employees (both present and prospective) to acquire and improve job-related knowledge, skills, and attitudes
- increase the level of producer participation in activities designed to improve the skill and knowledge of employers and employees
- establish knowledge and skill standards for certain types of agricultural employment
- identify and minimize imbalances in the demand for and supply of agricultural labour
- improve and enhance the image of agricultural employment
- facilitate, in a fair and orderly manner, the relocation of skilled and unskilled agricultural employees to industries (and regions) where there are shortages
- take account of ethnic and cultural considerations that have a bearing on labour supply.

Priorities and Action Plans

In addressing the labour concerns associated with the agricultural sector, the Joint Management Committee has identified seven priority areas and has in each case specified directions for action. As well, the Joint Committee proposes to engage the services of a full-time manager who would be responsible for overseeing the day-to-day implementation of this strategy. This contract position would be jointly funded by Canada Employment and Immigration and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. During the course of the year, the individual in this position would report at regular intervals to the Joint Management Committee on progress made in addressing the following priorities:

Partnership enhancement

The establishment of the Joint Management Committee represents a first step toward improving the cooperation/partnership between the agencies it represents. In particular, the Committee intends to promote further consultation between the Canada Employment and Immigration Centres/Agricultural Employment Services Centres, the British Columbia Ministry of Advanced Education, Training and Technology, and the private sector with respect to making sure training meets a real need.

Beyond this, the Joint Management Committee will ensure the continuation of recent efforts to establish linkages between employers and agencies that could potentially provide a supply of labour (i.e., the British Columbia Ministry of Social Services and Housing and the Canada Employment and Immigration Centres). The contacts needed to enhance cooperation will be established at both the regional and local levels.

Human resource planning

The Joint Management Committee intends to address the need for more human resource planning expertise within British Columbia's agricultural sector by building on the already existing FMI (Farm Management Initiative). During 1991/92, the Agricultural Employment Services and Canada Employment Centres will identify where the need for human resource planning is most acute within the agricultural sector. Targeting these areas or industries, ARDCORP will expand the number of FMI seminars dealing with forecasting human resource needs and maintaining human resources. The Ministry of Advanced Education, Training and Technology and the commodity groups will also participate in the delivery of training focused on these subjects. To make producers more aware of the benefits to be gained by participating, Agricultural Employment Services and the commodity producers will undertake an expanded marketing campaign.

Training and education

Pursuant to the steps that it will take to enhance cooperation among members of the partnership it represents, the Joint Management Committee will promote the development of a program evaluation system that will enable it to assess how well present training programs and other mechanisms are meeting the needs of industries within the agricultural sector. The system would be designed to take account of human resource planning data and would be used to identify how current or proposed training programs contribute to balancing the demand for and supply of labour.

Further, in keeping with the objectives set out in this document, the British Columbia Federation of Agriculture, the Agricultural Employment Services/Canada Employment and Immigration Centres, the Ministry of Advanced Education, Training and Technology (along with others where appropriate) will undertake the task of establishing knowledge and skill standards for certain types of agricultural employ-

ment. This effort could lead to the development and implementation of an apprenticeship or other similar system for certain jobs within the agricultural sector. It is realistic to expect that a model of such a system might be developed and applied (i.e., feasibility tested) on several key positions in agriculture before the end of 1991.

Labour mobility

The Joint Management Committee will press for full implementation of the Agriculture Mobility Program to expand the supply of skilled and unskilled employees to industries (and regions) where there are shortages. As well, the Committee will support efforts by Canada Employment Centre and Agricultural Employment Services personnel to mount an organized campaign to draw workers from supply regions.

With respect to the recruitment of foreign workers into British Columbia's agricultural sector, the Joint Management Committee will investigate the applicability of the "nursery shared management" committee's experience to other industries within the sector. The enhanced Foreign Worker Recruitment process, which has provided a fair and reasonable means of meeting the needs of the nursery industry, will be expanded to other commodity groups where appropriate. The Joint Management Committee will also seek to have changes put in place to encourage visa applications at overseas points for people wishing to come to British Columbia for a working holiday. This would require Canada Employment Centres to develop better links with Canada Immigration Centres.

The image of agricultural labour

The Joint Management Committee intends to move immediately on improving the image of agriculture and of agricultural employment opportunities by

- better informing the industry and the public of services available directed at labour issues.

- targeting potential agricultural employees, emphasizing the positive lifestyle factors associated with working in the agricultural sector (the rural-agricultural alternative to urban living will hold appeal for those who seek opportunities for outdoor activity, relatively independent working conditions, etc.).

This initiative would involve all members of the partnership. Vehicles such as the B.C. Agriculture Magazine could be used to reach industry. The communications initiative should also take advantage of existing vehicles that focus on potential workers in this field (e.g., 4-H and agriculture in the classroom). The approach could also require the partnership to create its own avenues of communication.

Incentives

The Joint Management supports the idea of building (additional) incentives into existing provincial and federal programs (e.g., the Canada First Program and British Columbia Ministry of Social Services and Housing programs such as Employment Initiatives). These incentives would be aimed at encouraging those who are interested to pursue seasonal work in the agricultural sector without financial disadvantage.

It is expected that the corporate business manager would coordinate the partnership's approach to these steps. A close relationship between Canada Employment and Immigration Centres and the British Columbia Ministry of Social Services and Housing would also be needed at a senior level to reexamine the present allowance structure.

Housing

The Joint Management Committee will call for and provide support for an investigation into the present state of agricultural housing for permanent and seasonal agricultural employees. The investigation should determine housing needs and identify options for meeting those needs.